

Town of Natick - Town Governance Study Committee

Approved meeting minutes

May 17, 2023 7:00 PM

Via Zoom

Members present: Carol Gloff (Chair), Matt Brand (Vice-Chair), Josh Ostroff (Clerk), Hillary Truslow, Dan Sullivan, Lisa Tabenkin, Michael Avitzur, Ex-Officio Member Sue Salamoff. Also present: John Petrin, Carl Valente, Bernie Lynch

The meeting was called to order by Chair Gloff at 7:04 PM with reference to the regulations applicable to virtual public meetings, followed by a roll call.

Public Speak

None.

Public Survey

Mike provided an update; he and Hillary have gone through it and organized responses by broad themes. They are not yet able to provide numbers. Mike shared preliminary findings.

- Town Meeting
 - ineffective, rubber stamp, dysfunctional
 - inefficient, takes too long
 - too many people, too many vacant seats
 - not representative, too many people hold too much power
 - certain office-holders should be barred from serving
- Town government generally
 - inefficient, too slow, structure too bloated or too many layers
 - lack of accountability/transparency
 - better two-way communication needed
 - better representation needed
 - spends too much
- Salary/Stipend should be paid to Select Board (or Council)
- Town Administrator (and staff) needs more power
- Relationship between town and schools needs improvement
- Citizen involvement/oversight must be retained/expanded
 - Too much power concentrated in too few hands, reduce barriers to involvement
 - "special interests"
- Please explain the process for [charter] change.

There was the most interest in an elected council with a professional manager, then RTM, then council-mayor. People who were less familiar with our FOG and those who were less satisfied were more likely to prefer a different FOG.

There were additional questions about the verbatim comments, including how many people were providing these comments; generally, just a handful.

There will be more specifics at the next meeting.

Josh noted that with 88 responses, this was directional information. A more concerted effort would likely yield greater response. Dan noted that this topic was not something that interested

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a large portion of the population. Bernie agreed that this was indicative of generally low public interest and awareness in local government. John observed that local election turnout was low everywhere. There was further discussion about declining interest and participation.

Town Meeting

Carol asked if there were further thoughts from our last discussion. Josh felt that we needed to continually improve every aspect of local government, but we should focus on more large scale change and propose a process to choose where to move away from TM altogether. Dan expanded on this. At a certain point we needed to decide whether to keep TM or move away from it.

Carol expressed her frustration with our last TM. Her personal opinion is that we should be laying out options; if we as a community want to stay with TM, identify the things we need to solve. She is not personally at the point to say we should change.

Carol shared her conversation from earlier today with the chair of the CBRC, and recounted their discussions about TM and other topics of interest to the committee.

Michael noted that this recommendation would be a highly visible outcome of the committee.

Matt thought it was viable for us to say that TM as currently constituted does not work. There are two ways to fix it: incremental, or change all together. It was valid to recommend that we change the status quo. We can identify things that need to be explored and leave it for the next group.

Hillary agrees with Matt. We can provide two options – fixing or replacing TM.

Dan commented that there was a perception that we would be saying to keep or replace TM. It's possible that we straddle that and point to alternatives.

Sue spoke to how TM is not actually representative. There was a disconnect between many TM members and their constituents. There was a lack of knowledge among many TM members, and there are low expectations of TM members vs. Council members. Council would replace both TM and the Select Board. Sue added that the Administration is also pointing out that TM delays projects because of its nature. If we were to keep TM she would recommend an annual session. She feels that we have lost the concept of true representation.

Josh pushed back on the idea of one TM session per year vs. two. There was discussion about the history of Special TMs.

John observed that this is a common discussion among communities in Massachusetts.

Carol wants to avoid this becoming a lightning rod. John suggested we go back to the charge of the committee and not to lose the incremental changes in the big picture discussion.

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Josh moved to recommend that Town Meeting needs to be reformed or replaced, and that the Town needs a public process that leads to a decision about its legislative body. Dan seconded. The motion passed unanimously by roll call.

We discussed the need for more specifics about what we mean by reform, and the report can be a vehicle for that. Dan agreed that the narrative could do this, and that providing real world examples of how different forms of government can be successful; this would make our work more understandable to readers.

Appointed Committees

To be discussed at a future meeting

Citizen Participation

We discussed this at a high level in a previous meeting

Minutes

Minutes for May 3 with corrections were approved on a motion by Matt, seconded by Dan and unanimously voted by roll call with Hillary abstaining

Minutes for May 8 with corrections were approved on a motion by Matt, seconded by Dan and unanimously voted by roll call with Hillary abstaining

Report

Josh noted he had shared an outline and had confidence that we would deliver a solid product. The structure, history, process and resources will be faithful to a good work process. We discussed the importance of the report. Dan noted that we needed a solid executive summary that properly framed our work – what the committee was, and what it was not.

Sue wanted to ensure that we had a good lead in to the report.

On a motion by Matt, seconded by Dan, the meeting was adjourned at 8:26 pm by a unanimous roll call vote.

Respectfully Submitted,
Joshua Ostroff, Clerk